

AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Italy (Rome) and the World at the Dawn of 2016 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants are invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles. This part is concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives' that relates to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants. Participants are invited to share their preoccupations and experiences as citizens of Australia, and to explore these from their various social roles, be these in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities.

Initially there was a fragmented conversation as though rather than listening to each other, one's own words and thoughts had to prevail over the others. There were questions about what this is for, which countries are involved in the project, and who the participants are; doubts about the validity of such meeting, as though it should focus on 'actions and results'.

One member speaks of different layers of meaning - manifest and unconscious - that intersect a group like this.

Then slowly people start to relax in the task and the first big question raised is the impossibility to understand what is going on, even if not qualified to which field or role. More in the area of an existential quest: it is voicing impotence and suffering.

People speak about hostility and refer to conflicts, to the dynamics of the money market, to Isis.

One member speaks of feeling secure in Rome in this historical moment and links the feeling to the beauty of Rome.

Another observes how for the first time ever she did not feel secure walking in a park at dusk, and feels that, as a grandmother, the world handed over to her granddaughters will be less safe. There is a scary war situation which produces changes even in small daily events like walking in a park but "I can cope with that if I live in the present and don't think about the future". There are considerations about how the

feeling of fragility could also be connected to age. But other comments point to the fact that indeed Rome is empty: less people walk in the street, go to restaurants, to public spaces as a result of the fear of terrorism.

Then people speak about their perception of the increasing aggression, rudeness, carelessness towards the others, and anger and violence too.

There is a feeling of unpredictable events determined by the absence of civic behavior. Even trade unions are not present in defence of the workers and individualism prevails. There is a fleeting reflection on the government of Rome which is corrupted and in the hands of mafia. *You cannot respect a system which doesn't respect itself.*

Here there is the mention to climate change, both as concern for the absence of a real winter and for the short sighted government policies which ban motor's traffic in the city for a few days, but do nothing about ruling the temperature of the boilers that heat the buildings. However this important theme is not developed further.

The conversation moves to the observation that there is a strong presence of both the police and the army in daily life (*but we should not really see the army in normal civil life...*) which could be seen as both reassuring and a threat. *Are we governed by the army rather than having a political government?* It is also a moment of recognition that for the last few months Rome is in the unusual situation of not having a mayor.

Someone affirms that it is a real time of change and growth, one cannot hide, it is a time when there is the opportunity to transform. The response to that is that anxiety is removed and once again the question of not understanding appears (*but what we don't understand?*)

The discourse goes to Paris and the October bombing: the terrorists were actually French, an internal cancer, but the disease is not seen as such and it is projected outside by bombing Syria (*from Paris with love?!*)

Inside our own country cancer manifests itself with the nearly illegal manipulation of sensitive data and with the much worse situation where a woman in her own house gets beaten up to death during a robbery.

There is fear and people now avoid public spaces.

Climate change and the general denial of its urgency, is spoken about together with its connections with multinational/multisectors industries:

Monsanto having the monopoly of seeds, pesticides and pharmaceutical products, for instance.

There are different perceptions and feelings about the tragic events happening in the West and in the East - dead people in Paris for us Europeans weigh more than those in Beirut, for instance. *I feel more for the people I am connected to and I am ashamed to say it.*

Here the response is that there are new models for politics, new ways of aggregation from grassroots and the example of the five stars movement is given (a new 'grassroot 'movement which had nearly won the majority in Parliament at the last Italian political elections).

The last few minutes are taken by talking about New Year's Eve in Koln and the thousand men attacking women as an example of the kind of war we are fighting now, but at the same time the doubt about being manipulated by the media is raised (*how did they know that there were 1000 men? Is it an attack to Angela Merkel and her opening to the immigrants?*)

The very last remark goes to the encyclical letter of the Pope about the environment which has not been listened to, nor followed by any action. Not even the Pope's words are accepted!

Part 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim is to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.

Part 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members are working with the information resulting from Parts 1 and 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and, developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members are working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.

In the second part two themes picked up by both groups are identified:

- 1) **the need to understand (or a defence against understanding already too much of the unpalatable?)**
- 2) **environment and climate change**

Between fear and hope.

Fear and fragility are the underlying feelings of the meeting, in particular fear to be a woman relating to Islam: *does Islam hate women?*

Islam appears in a few remarks throughout the meeting: it is perceived as totally foreign and to be avoided.

Hope rests in the individual capacity to take responsibility and act accordingly. There seems to be no hope beyond the individual field of action.

Both fear and lack of understanding seem to point out to the feeling of being completely out of control and impotent in a world where everything is too much, too complex to be managed.

As a trend which has been developed in other LPs over the last few years, indeed complexity and globalization seem to manoeuvre people into individualized retreat. In the past years however there were still pockets of 'beauty', socialization and social networks (not only the internet ones); today, in a world where one's ecological niche becomes more and more fragmented, individualism seems to be the only avenue for hope.

The need to understand (or a defence against understanding already too much of the unpalatable?)

Analysis 1

This theme looks like the umbrella of an articulated range of subthemes.

The need to understand speaks of feeling lost in a world which is fast and completely out of normal people's control. It speaks of vulnerability and fragility, of fear and also fear to be a woman (maybe daring to be creative in a destructive environment?). Everything is too much, too complex to be managed. Daily life is impoverished and deteriorated; with the heavy cuts to the public money even prevention in the health field is threatened and data show already higher mortality and illness in the population.

It is an undoubted time of crisis; some wonder whether this is what war is like in the present time of globalization, some reflect that there is nowhere to hide and therefore it is also a time of unavoidable change and new opportunities to emerge. (Between fear and hope...)

In fact as the theme is developed in the third part, it appears that enough is understood, which points to a frightening scenario. Maybe the need to understand is actually a wish to find a different interpretation for an uncomfortable reality and for one's own uncomfortable feelings, like shame, racism, aggression.

Hypothesis 1

There are many signs of social disaggregation and deterioration of the quality of life; to be in control of one's environment is like a dream of the past. The tempo is fast, events are not intelligible, the capacity to link different events and understand their meaning is lost.

Members of society can only respond by retreating into small fields of action where things become manageable and 'understandable'; where some sense of potency can still be established.

The chance is that by doing so, one's capacity to observe and name one's own experiences - however disturbing - is forfeited.

The desire to understand so that choices are operated by informed knowledge is a well meaning wish; it might well be also an expression of denial: facts and feelings reveal a disturbing reality both in the psychic world and in the outer world: no understanding might be a defence against knowing already too much of a world under threat. A certain kind of innocent not understanding might be more manageable than the powerlessness deriving from the experience of inner and outer forces outside one's control.

Environment and climate change.

Analysis 2

Man's actions towards the environment are exploitative and short-sighted.

In a discourse that intersects with the first theme, members feel impotent and complain against authority, which operates through meaningless rule; the only alternative is seen in individuals who through their own efforts and self awareness decide to take responsibility and act for instance by differentiating garbage and waste, save energy, water etc.

The theme touches also on the missing political leadership/paternal function: *society of Thelemacus, not of Ulysses.*

Big multinational corporations follow private interests, and yet they can dictate the rules for the population en large, from what to eat to how to produce goods, from where to invest to what goods to develop. It is

unavoidable to wonder whether in fact the vacant political leadership is not just absent, but actually colluding with the big corporations to the detriment of the citizens' life.

Hypothesis 2

There is a real threat to the planet and to its - and our - survival. An effective leadership who can respond to the danger is missing; at the same time even words from the Pope re: environmental threat are not heard. There is massive denial.

It appears that the only possible way is to take responsibility as individuals, who are choosing to be aware of the environment: they differentiate garbage, save on heating, water, use bicycles etc. and try to use resources in a more sustainable way. Individuals in this way can win back the feeling of making a difference.

However this results also in the underlying perception of being impotent as at the level of the collective there is such a fragmentation that hope of effectively preventing global disaster gets lost.

As conveners, we had the experience of dealing with powerful fragmentation and denial, which appeared with the very first remarks of the meeting.

Reality seems to be shaped by a thick weave of interconnected events, so thick and complex that understanding is perceived as an impossible task. The thinking capacity of probing the complexity cannot get through the curtain and bounces back in fragmentation.

It has also been very difficult to identify separate themes as they kept overlapping and intersecting in hazy confusion. We hypothesize the presence of denial by our difficulty to think.

We wonder whether this would be the flip side of the 'desire to understand' i.e. its avoidance, possibly because probing and understanding could raise uncomfortable and unmanageable feelings of shame, guilt, powerlessness and hopelessness.

The themes of last years to some extent were similar to what emerges this year, only that this time it seems to have become '*the thing*' a concrete fact, enacted by the group.

There is a war, but differently from the 2nd WW for example, there are no clear 'goodies' nor 'baddies', no friends nor foes, there is no available social solidarity nor social support which comes from belonging to one side of the fence.

It is a disconcerting war where the known rules have been upturned and individuals are lost. The wish to belong to any side of the fence is unrealistic. Citizens experience the uncertainty of war in a globalized world.

It was also interesting to note what the LP did not speak about: authority and leading political figures; generations and generational passage. Fleeting remarks on sensitive themes which were not actually picked up nor explored.

Conveners: Franca Fubini & Alfredo Veneziale